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Thirty-Nine Steps to Happiness

By David Cairns



It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men in a train. One man says, “What’s that package up there in the baggage rack?”

And the other answers, “Oh, that’s a MacGuffin.”

The first one asks, “What’s a MacGuffin?”

“Well,” the other man says, “it’s an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.”

The first man says, “But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,” and the other one answers, “Well then, that’s no MacGuffin!” So you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all.

—Alfred Hitchcock to François Truffaut

The shaggy-dog story that gave Alfred Hitchcock his pet name for “the thing the spies are after” but that is of no real importance to the audience may have been told to him by Angus MacPhail, an English screenwriter with a very Scottish name. If so, it’s all too apt, since *The 39 Steps* (1935), the first Hitchcock film to really crank up the MacGuffin as plot motor, is full of Englishmen who sound like Scots and Scots who sound like Englishmen. It also features two traveling salesmen in a train compartment

who seem about to break into the MacGuffin sketch at any instant but never quite do .

..

Fellini once claimed to feel surprise whenever he saw a location he'd filmed, such as the Trevi Fountain, still sitting in place, as if it had any business being real. He thought such sites should cease to exist once he'd immortalized them on-screen. Living as I do in Scotland, I feel a similar cinematic déjà vu when I look upon the Forth Bridge's iron grid work, familiar from Hitchcock's Scottish caper, as if it stretched not to the Kingdom of Fife but to the Kingdom of Shadows. I get the vertiginous sensation of a waking dream, the national characteristic of Hitchcock Country.

“Well, you’re certainly a difficult man to follow.”

Aside from brandishing a splendidly vaporous MacGuffin, *The 39 Steps* is the film where Hitchcock really hit his stride. It takes from the climax of *The Lodger* (1927) the idea of an innocent man unjustly accused and extends it across the whole story, giving Hitchcock a formula he would return to obsessively. It refines the blend of humor and thrills he'd been toying with and adds romance to the mix. For the first time in his career, everything works.

The promise had been there from Hitchcock's first silent feature, a theatrical melodrama called *The Pleasure Garden* (1925), but the director's synthesis of Russian montage and German expressionist angles had been too forceful, too artistic, for his bosses. (The truly cinematic has always been regarded with some suspicion in the U.K.—especially in the film industry.) So even when Hitch scored a genuine hit with *The Lodger*, a dark thriller that really displayed his talents, rather than rewarding him with more creative freedom, they lumbered him with a long series of unsuitable projects.

A Scottish producer, John Maxwell, gave Hitchcock his first talkie, *Blackmail* (1929). Another inspired success in the crime genre, it again led to an array of stodgy assignments at British International Pictures, known as “the porridge factory” owing to its Scottish management and cheaply made, homogenous product. Finally escaping to Gaumont British, Hitch at last found a sympathetic producer, Michael Balcon (later the head of Ealing Studios), and triumphantly returned to thrillers with *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934)—his first espionage caper.

With his next film, Hitch would take playful revenge on the land of porridge.

“It was a silly show, all capering women and monkey-faced men, and I did not stay long.”

This is the single sentence devoted to Richard Hannay's trip to the music hall in the 1915 John Buchan novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. Hitchcock and scenarist Charles Bennett spun it into a whole opening sequence, setting up quite a different plot. In Britain, where literature, even a “shocker” like the Buchan book, has always been more highly regarded than film, it was the cause of some amazement that a filmmaker would take such liberties. And Hitchcock admired the book, had long wanted to film it.

Buchan, another Scot, was a diplomat with links to the secret service. As a novelist, he specialized in adventure stories, and had turned to the espionage thriller to capitalize on the political tensions of the time. *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is a very early example of the man-on-the-run thriller, and it's that general idea that must have attracted Hitchcock. But, he later explained, Buchan's yarn contains little that is actually cinematic, so he chose to create visual sequences from whole cloth, pegging them to tiny incidents and moments drawn from the book. He's faithful to such minutiae as the hero's address in London, while paying little regard to the structure, themes, characters, central incidents, and narrative of his source. He certainly did take from it the double chase scenario, with the hero trying to track down the villains while he himself is being pursued, a format put to good use in many of his subsequent films. Crucially for Hitchcock, though, the hero is not a professional spy but an innocent civilian, thrust into the crisis by freak circumstance.

"I'd planned a very different program for myself."

The illuminated sign "Music Hall" appears letter by letter as the camera pans across it, a distant echo of the flashing sign ("To-Night—Golden Curls") that opens *The Lodger*. We buy a ticket and enter the bustling theater, not via subjective camera but in a series of inserts—close-ups of a hand proffering money and feet walking, a medium shot following an anonymous back—that make us one with the hero while curiously robbing him of any individual identity. We are a member of the audience, about to see a show.

"I'm nobody," our protagonist will say, like Ulysses. And like that mythic hero, he's about to embark on an odyssey that will eventually take him back to his starting point and unite him with a woman, after encounters with savage enemies, seductresses, inclement weather, and sheep.

Mr. Memory, cockney entertainer, is played by Scotsman Wylie Watson, a disguised signpost to the film's narrative direction (roughly speaking, north-northwest). As Memory starts his act, our hero speaks for the first time, and is somehow identified by his question (it can't be his accent) as Canadian. In changing Buchan's hero from a Scot raised in South Africa, Hitch seems to have intended a trick popular in British filmmaking at the time: make the lead Canadian and cast an American star. But as things turned out, by casting Madeleine Carroll, a British leading lady who had scored success in Hollywood, Hitchcock had already filled his quota of transatlantic appeal, so the role of Hannay went to Robert Donat, a fresh British star.

Hannay is scripted as somewhat hard-boiled, but Donat's light touch brings welcome flippancy, and sets the tone for later Hitchcockian heroes, culminating in Cary Grant. While Fritz Lang found that American audiences preferred everyman to superman, Hitchcock's struggle was to move from the light-comedian leads of his best British films to the more overtly manly American stars. Finally, in Grant and Jimmy Stewart, he found actors who wore their masculinity lightly. In other words, he found his Hollywood answer to Donat.

"I'm afraid I've been guilty of leading you down the garden path. Or should it be 'up'?"

Hitchcock's improvements on his source material are quickly evident. Annabella "Smith" (Lucie Mannheim), the international woman of intrigue, is a lot more appealing than Buchan's Canadian anti-Semite, who forces his way into Hannay's flat and starts spouting conspiracy theories. Not only does Hitch wisely abandon the overt reactionary politics, he also introduces a note of sex—and sleazy sex at that. (As Hannay and Smith head back to his place after her seeming proposition, Hitchcock, making his customary cameo, strolls by with screenwriter Bennett—the only time a collaborator was permitted to accompany the director for his walk-on, unless we count his dogs, Geoffrey and Stanley, in 1963's *The Birds*.)

Buchan wrote his novel at the start of World War I, setting it just before hostilities began; the frenzied chase takes place in a Britain still sleepily unsuspecting. Hitchcock's cycle of six thrillers that led him to Hollywood echo Buchan by painting a kind of dream portrait of Britain on the cusp of war.

Devoid of overt political content, the films nevertheless capture the zeitgeist with their sinister intrigues simmering beneath calm domestic scenes and their sudden plunges into panic and peril. The last of the cycle, *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), explicitly mocks the ostrich-headed Brits but nevertheless takes place in a fascist Ruritania, with no mention of Germany. Mannheim's Teutonic accent in *The 39 Steps* is the only touch of political reality in the film, since her presence in Britain was a direct result of events in her homeland.

"It's your funeral."

Hannay's flat is as unfurnished as his character, a blank waiting to be filled with the furniture of story. Smith drops a few plot clues, withdraws the apparent offer of a one-night stand, then turns up knifed in the middle of the night. Hannay is trapped in the flat with killers outside, but Hitch never bothers to explain how they got in to kill Smith or why they left without killing Hannay. Even by Hitchcock standards, this is a pretty bold deployment of sheer nonsense, but his shamelessness is matched by his magician's sense of how to divert the audience's mind from pondering implausibilities. (Hitch's use of elision to simply skip over plot problems may reach its apogee in 1958's *Vertigo*, where we never see how Jimmy Stewart gets down from the building he's dangling off of at the end of scene one.)

One of Hitch's great subjective effects follows at once. Hannay pictures a map of Scotland with a vision of Smith's face superimposed, intoning, with a tinny, telephonic distortion, as if she were calling long-distance from the underworld, a hypnotic litany of clues for him to follow. This little séance, echoing Ulysses' conversations with departed spirits, not only lets us in on Hannay's thought process, it forges a mental connection between his Scottish destination and the Land of the Dead . . . a place as ethereal and abstract as a map.

"There is a man in Scotland whom I must visit next if anything is to be done."

The first totem of Scotland in the film is the Forth Bridge, stretching to infinity like a steampunk Nessie. In reality, it merely crosses an estuary of the North Sea, but in Iain Banks's novel *The Bridge*, it's an iron cobweb linking the Lands of Life and Death.

For Hannay, it proves a division between the art deco London of cockneys and streetlighting and the mythic and irrational world of Darkest Scotland.

As rear-projection footage scrolls past the train window, we're speeding toward a murky studio Brigadoon of backdrops and dry ice. Given the artifice, it's appropriate that the vaguely Gaelic-sounding Alt-na-Shellach, Hannay's destination, does not appear on any map outside this film.

Hitch's geographic plan: list the things the audience is likely to know about your story's location, then use them. The Swiss setting of *Secret Agent* (1936) led to chocolate and the Alps, *Saboteur* (1942) climaxes atop the Statue of Liberty, *Vertigo* features the Golden Gate Bridge and a Spanish church. So the Forth Bridge introduces us to Scotland and allows a daring escape—and the next we know, we're in the Highlands, Hannay having apparently hiked a hundred miles under cover of a single fade-out. Did he fold his map and leap across the crease? Hitchcock's Scotland seems insubstantial enough to allow this.

John Laurie, who plays the crofter, was British cinema's default screen Scot, the scraggy embodiment of gloomy Calvinist predetermination (his television catchphrase: "We're all doomed," always uttered with lilting satisfaction). As his wife, Peggy Ashcroft makes a fair go at a nonspecific Scottish accent, though it's quite unsuited to her character's Glasgow backstory. The sad little sequence with the crofter's wife, almost a short story in its own right, exploits the loose, picaresque form Hitch has chosen, and highlights a Hitchcockian contradiction: a student of structure, he loved rules but also breaking them. He needed a strong narrative spine, but it had better contain plenty of kinks.

"These men will stop at nothing."

This is a film bolted together from plot holes and panic. It's clear enough that Hannay must locate "a man in Scotland" and avoid a man with a missing finger. When the two turn out to be one and the same, we would normally expect some kind of explanation: why was Smith planning to visit the man who wanted her dead? But it's enough that Hannay has been ensnared in the plot; filling out the motivation of a character who died long minutes of screen time ago doesn't interest Hitch—or us, as it turns out.

The elisions that allow Hitchcock to jump through space-time with dreamlike abruptness open up a whole box of narrative tricks, as when a fatal bullet is caught by a breast-pocket hymnal that we learn about only in the next scene. Divine intervention? God is a shy, offscreen character in Hitchcock's world, like Mrs. Bates, and not one who necessarily helps out; if he's supervising the events of *The Birds* or *Psycho* (1960) via those famous high-angle shots, it's an open question as to whose side he's on.

As is often the case in the Hitchcock oeuvre, the suave villain is surrounded by a charming bourgeois family, which creates a deceptive air of normality. Like Hitchcock, Godfrey Tearle's fingerless cad Professor Jordan has a bespectacled daughter called Pat. Otherwise, he has little to do, at least compared with James Mason in *North by Northwest* (1959). It's difficult to keep a supporting cast around when your hero is continually fleeing for his life.

If Tearle delivers his villainy with chillingly bland understatement, Frank Cellier, as his cohort the sheriff, is all perspiring, beady-eyed malevolence. Are the coppers actually spies or just deluded? For the policiphobic Hitchcock, it's bad enough that they're coppers.

One reason that *The 39 Steps* feels so cozily familiar is the way it introduces devices recognizable to us from later films, as when the hero tries to escape his enemies by making himself conspicuous at a public gathering (see *North by Northwest*). Such scenes draw on the lexicon of anxiety dreams, justifying Hitchcock's claim that "I make nightmares."

It's interesting to note how Hitchcock's preference for amateur heroes over professional secret agents fits with his own love of order and careful preparation. Being caught without a plan, without a reasonable expectation of how things will develop, was obviously one of the director's chief terrors, and it's the one he exploits over and over again in his films.

"What chance have you got, tied to me?"

Buchan himself congratulated Hitchcock on improving his original shocker, and Madeleine Carroll's leading lady was the change he approved of most. On a straight narrative level, she provides the hero with someone to explain his plans to, someone with whom he can share his emotions with increasing openness. But she also introduces a love story that is the film's secret reason for being.

Hitchcock is sometimes accused of not caring much for character motivation (why does Tippi Hedren ascend to a dark attic in the middle of the night during an avian apocalypse?), but he was happy to use it when it suited him. By refusing to fall in line as a doting female lead, Pamela (surname blank, awaiting marriage) wins the audience's respect even as she makes the hero's life more difficult. From her first scene, when she denounces him to the police, she persistently defies narrative convention and astonishes with her determination not to trust this velvet-voiced fugitive from justice. It all makes for a much sparkier relationship, and makes the eventual conciliation all the sweeter.

Hitchcockian fugitives are often compelled to travel in disguise, and the false identities ensnare them. In *North by Northwest*, Roger O. Thornhill's quest to prove he's not George Kaplan forces him to assume the identity of George Kaplan. Fate keeps pushing Hannay on Pamela, until they must pass as man and wife. An innkeeper, like Procrustes in the Ulysses myth, tries to cram the hero into an unsuitable (marital) bed. And it's not just mythic references: all manner of folklore weaves through the adventure. Hannay's hanging Pamela's wet stockings before the fire seems to anticipate the arrival of Father Christmas, while their hiding under a bridge as sheep pass overhead calls to mind the story "Three Billy Goats Gruff."

"Oh, do stop whistling."

While *The Lady Vanishes* may be the only Hitchcock film where the MacGuffin is a melody, music plays a foregrounded role in the narratives of all his British thrillers, and a theme from the opening of *The 39 Steps* eventually leads Hannay to the climax

of his adventure. The tune has been nagging at him throughout the latter part of the story, a subconscious clue, making this the first Hitchcock thriller to feature a kind of Freudian investigation. Memory is the answer—Mr. Memory, in fact.

Hannay deduces that the worrisome tune was heard in the music hall, but it can also be found, cleverly disguised, in the tense opening-titles theme. In fact, what Hannay whistles, shorn of those tiddly-om-pom trimmings, sounds more like the stark thriller version, as if he were whistling the movie score. This further blurs Hannay's night at the theater with our night at the cinema.

As to that title: there was a plan to have it carry some meaning, perhaps leading to a secret air base or something (in Buchan's book, the steps go to a beach from whence a spy will escape the country), but Bennett and Hitchcock realized that such a literal conclusion would deform their story. By swinging the narrative back around to Mr. Memory, they can identify the MacGuffin while keeping it completely abstract and offscreen. A code name for a network of spies, a gobbledygook secret formula—the mysterious MacGuffin box is empty.

If the thriller plot leads, essentially, nowhere at all, the film can now stand revealed as a fiendish contraption to unite Richard Hannay with Pamela. As the second shot of the film showed a hand buying a ticket, the closing shot shows two hands coming together, the chains that once linked them involuntarily now hanging empty and needless.

“What you were laughing at just now is true.”

The seeds are sown in this fairyland adventure for the great unfulfilled project of Hitchcock's later years, *Mary Rose*, another Scottish tale from a far more whimsical Scottish writer, J. M. Barrie. More explicitly a ghost story even than *Vertigo*, this movie would have exploited its northern setting as a liminal zone between the living and the dead, the real and the unreal. In that sense, as in *The 39 Steps*, it's a metaphor for cinema. At the end of the unproduced screenplay, Hitchcock's narrator wearily invites us to return home: “There, of course, it's raining.” Because it's real, mundane, and therefore unsatisfactory? Because it always rains when you leave the cinema? Or just because it's Scotland?

David Cairns is a Scottish writer and filmmaker. He blogs at Shadowplay (dcairns.wordpress.com), where he wrote about a different Hitchcock film each week for a year. He teaches at Edinburgh College of Art and is currently at work on a documentary about French cinema of the 1930s.